

Select an item from the list and press Go button

Go

ARTICLES IN
BANGALORE

Bangalore
 Being Here
 Column
 Culture
 People
 The City
 The Magazine
 Vex & The City
 Food Fetish
 Nightlife
 Shopping
 Bangalore In
 Pictures
 Pub Hop
 Restaurants
 Business
 Editoratoria
 Movies
 Meet the Chef
 Reviews
 I Love FirstFoodie
 Welcome To My City
 Hotels
 Music

59

Like

[The City](#)

'Tis the season for Averakai



By Prathima A Narayan

As we near the end of a year, one of Karnataka's most traditional food crops flourishes. And what better way to recognise it than with a food festival. Explocity made a trip to the Avarekai Mela in the city and what we got was more just a taste of the delicious bean.

Sri Vasavi Condiments looks like your ordinary, run of the mill sweet shop. The glass counters are filled with sweets and savouries. The shelves are lined with jars of pickle and chutney.

However, none of these are what makes the store famous.

Sri Vasavi Condiments is known for its Avarekai (val beans, hycainth beans or Indian beans).

Avarekai in the form of dosas and vadas, upittu and nippattu, chikki and jamun, pani puri and puran poli, even the fried rice and Manchurian is infused with Avarekai.

At the end of every year, when the Avarekai crop is at its best, Sri Vasavi hosts the Avarekai Mela. This year, the mela is from December 27 to January 7. Aptly, it takes place at the Food Street on Sajjan Rao Circle.

On any other day, the Street is stocked with stalls and stores selling a variety of popular Indian street food. During the mela, Avarekai will be the single most important ingredient for almost all.



The mela is an initiative started by Gita Shivkumar, the owner of Sri Vasavi. Her daughter, Swati is her right hand man. "We started the mela to help out the farmers and create awareness. It is not a primary crop, they grow it along with raagi," said Swati. "And after all, it is the traditional food of Karnataka," she added as she swapped food coupons for bills.

This year, the mela is thirteen years old. "You know the groundnut mela? We are trying to reach the same level," she said. Farmers from Magadi flock to the store to sell their product.

The Mela is a 12-day long affair. Stalls are set up throughout the street and the hired cooks take care of everything from production to customer service. The bean-laden dishes are made fresh and served straight from the wok.

"There are around 108 items in the mela," said Swati. "Every year we try to come up

with something new and increase the number of items. When we started, there were only 10-20 items," she said.

The Avarekai masalavade at Rs 40 a plate is the most popular item on the menu. At 4:30 pm on day 1, they had already sold 1000 vadas.

The crowd had not even set in.



"After six o'clock, the crowds start coming in," Prajwal, a student at BIT informed us, while relishing a plate of gobi manchurian mixed with avarekai. Prajwal and his friend Darshan visit the mela every year.

"We are expecting around 2000 people per day, mostly locals. About 10-15% come from outside Karnataka and 1-2% from outside India," said Swati.

Srinivasu Naidu from Banashankari too visits the mela every year. "It's a good initiative, no?" he remarked. "They have no competition because they are the only ones in the city," he said.

On the other hand, Kamesh from Malleshwaram was there for the first time. "We heard about it from the newspaper," she said. "And anyway, I needed to buy Avarekai," she added. Kamesh had just bought a litre of Avarekai from the Annapoorneshwari Avarebele Kendra.



A farmer for over 30 years, Kempe Thimmegowda runs the Kendra, which is nothing more than a niche in the wall right outside Sri Vasavi. Four tubs of Avarekai surround him, two filled with de-shelled beans, one shelled and one dried. When we met him, he had already sold 100 litres that day.

"We get bigger profits by selling at the Mela because there are no middlemen involved," explained Thimmegowda. "We also get to keep the scrap, like the peel, which we use to feed the cattle. This saves costs for us," he said.

Further down the lane, is Arya Vysya Refreshment. A 50-year-old establishment run by a father-son duo, Murugan and Mani. Arya Vysya also takes active part in the Mela. "We serve more sweets as the rest of the Mela concentrates largely on savoury," said Mani.

Mani explained that the best Avarekai is grown between December and January 14. "At this time, not only the quality but even the taste is at its best," he said. "Avarekai comes from Magadi, Chikmagalur, Kanakapura, Chikballapur and Hassana. But Magadi has the best crop," he said. "In fact, you will find Avarekai in every house in Magadi," he added with pride.

From Bendakaluru to Avarekai, it's good to know that Bangalore still loves its beans.

For those who cannot make it to the mela, make a trip to any of these restaurants for some Avarekai based delicacies.

Both Bon South and South Indies serve a buffet that features many Avarekai specialties. There's Avarekai sambhar to theeyal, which is a roasted coconut and tamarind based dish there is also Avarekai porichadu, which is crispy fried Avarekai and kurma, which is similar to the Udupi style is made with Avarekai.

Chef Saurav Saha at La Marvella's Golden Oak says that he is looking forward to including the bean in the restaurant's buffet. Some of the dishes he plans on introducing are Avarekai poriyal, khara baat and soppu pallya.



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